

“My Body is My Journal, and My Tattoos are My Story”: South African Psychology Students’ Reflections on Tattoo Practices

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Abstract The aim of this research study was to gain insight into a group of South African psychology students’ perceptions regarding tattoos. In particular, the prevalence of getting a tattoo; differences between various gender, racial, and religious groupings with regard to getting a tattoo; the most prominent reasons for getting or not getting a tattoo; and general perceptions regarding tattoos and people with tattoos were explored. Third-year psychology students participated in this multi-methods study. A survey regarding tattoo behavior and perceptions was completed by 175 participants, and interviews were conducted with five individuals. Descriptive statistics, chi-square analyses, as well as content and thematic analyses, were completed. While most participants (78.3%) did not have tattoos, they were relatively non-judgmental with regard to tattoo practices. Tattoos were valued for their symbolic personal meaning and as a form of self-expression, while religion, the permanence of tattoos and medical aspects deterred students from getting a tattoo.

Keywords Students’ perceptions regarding tattoos · Prominent reasons for getting a tattoo · Third-year psychology students · Symbolic personal meaning · Self-expression

Tattoos are visual phenomena that lead to powerful responses ranging from interest and admiration to revulsion and fear. Tattoos draw attention and make people ponder about the meanings behind tattoos. In contrast to the 1800s, when tattoos signified either being a criminal or deviant, people from

all walks of life obtain tattoos today. Currently, tattooing is viewed in a more normative light – as a means of expressing one’s identity, as signified by the words of actor [Johnny Depp](#), “My body is my journal, and my tattoos are my story”. Tattoos are also becoming more prominent, especially among emerging adults and student populations. The aim of this study was to explore a group of senior psychology students’ tattoo-related practices and perceptions.

Theoretical Grounding

Tattoos – A Definition Tattoos, as writing on the body, represent a strong form of visual and non-verbal communication ([Kosut 2000](#); [Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006](#)). [Wymann \(2010\)](#) argues that tattooing is a symbolic medium of communication. According to him, tattooing can be understood as (i) a product made by tools, materials and procedures; (ii) a form of body alteration; and (iii) a form of social behavior. In the process of tattooing, the body becomes a form of symbolic cultural investment, promoted through individuals’ identity-making efforts ([Bottrell 2007](#)). [Blanchard \(1994\)](#) and [Sanders \(1989\)](#) identified some primary functions of contemporary tattoos. Firstly, tattoos can function as a ritual: In a culture in which there are few rituals or rites of passage outside religion, the tattoo can serve as a physical mark of a life event. Furthermore, tattoos can also function as identification (individually or for a group); as a talisman to protect its bearer from harm; or as decoration. Tattoos are also regarded as people’s attempts to establish control over their own bodies ([Fisher 2002](#)).

Tattoos and the Student Population Although the history of tattooing has been long and controversial ([Firmin et al. 2008](#)), this phenomenon of body art seems to be increasing

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(Armstrong and Kelly 2001; Armstrong and Pace Murphy 1997; Armstrong et al. 2002a; Armstrong et al. 2002b; Firmin et al. 2012), especially among student populations. Armstrong et al. (2002a), Armstrong et al. (2002b) and Greif et al. (1999) found that the majority of students indicated that they obtained their tattoos during their years at university, that they still liked their tattoos, and that they were motivated to get more tattoos. However, there are also students who are dissatisfied with their tattoos, as they view their tattoos as embarrassing, because it is located at the wrong place, it was not what they wanted, or the tattoo artist made a mistake (Armstrong et al. 2002b).

Students do tend to become involved in more risk-taking behavior during their university years as they are away from home – often for the first time (Armstrong et al. 2002b). This might prompt the decision to get a tattoo. Although students are still inclined to get approval from their parents for getting tattoos, they were not discouraged to get tattoos even when their parents were passive or outraged about them wanting to get tattoos (Firmin et al. 2012).

Reasons for Getting Tattoos Armstrong et al. (2004b) argue that there are important social and social-psychological reasons why individuals become part of a subculture that has tattoos. Major reasons for getting tattoos by students have been identified as (i) to express themselves; (ii) to feel unique; (iii) to be themselves; (iv) to have a sense of independence; (v) to commemorate special events; (vi) for the heck of it; (vii) just to get one; (viii) for decoration; (ix) due to peer influence; (x) to identify themselves; (xi) as it is fashionable; (x) to express their individuality; (xi) to affiliate with a group; (xii) for religious commitment; (xiii) to be seen in a different light; (xiv) to be perceived as being sexy; (xv) being a symbol of commitment to a romantic relationship; (xvi) to rebel; (xvii) the need for autonomy; (xviii) as it is fun and adventurous; (xix) to be attractive; (xx) to appear tough; and (xxi) to appear mature (Armstrong and Kelly 2001; Armstrong et al. 2007; Armstrong et al. 2002a, 2002b; Armstrong et al. 2004b; Brallier et al. 2011; Carmen et al. 2012; Deschesnes et al. 2006; Firmin et al. 2008, 2012; Fisher 2002; Greif et al. 1999; Johnson 2006; King and Vidourek 2013; Koch et al. 2010; Laumann and Derick 2006; Lipscomb et al. 2008; Millner and Eichold 2001; Mun et al. 2012; Nikora and Awekotuku 2002; Schulz et al. 2006; Shelton and Peters 2008; Stirn et al. 2011; Swami 2011; Swami et al. 2012; Tiggemann and Golder 2006; Tiggemann and Hopkins 2011).

Modeling also serves as a reason why students especially get tattoos, as they see other people with tattoos enjoying their tattoos (Firmin et al. 2012). Therefore, students also tend to get tattoos because tattoos have become a fashion statement with so many celebrities flaunting their tattoos (Firmin et al. 2008; Johnson 2006; Tiggemann and Hopkins 2011). Armstrong et al. (2004b) argue that individuals also obtain

tattoos to feel distinct from others and to thus belong to a certain subculture.

In a study by Armstrong et al. (2002b), it was found that tattooed and non-tattooed individuals perceived individuals with tattoos positively, as being interesting, unique, enjoyable, self-confident, and desirable. This motivated non-tattooed individuals to get tattoos themselves. Armstrong et al. (2002b) also found that older students and students with less religious involvement were more inclined to obtain tattoos than did younger students and students who were more involved in religious activities.

Similar to clothing and jewelry, tattoos are used to mark the identities of those with tattoos (Armstrong et al. 2004b); therefore, nowadays, tattoos are not viewed as deviant as in the past anymore (Armstrong et al. 2004b; Brallier et al. 2011; Dickson et al. 2014; Silver et al. 2011). Many studies (Armstrong et al. 2004a; Forbes 2001; Greif et al. 1999) found that the major reason why students obtain tattoos is that they want to express themselves and create unique identities for themselves. Thus, tattooing enables people to achieve distinctiveness from others through modifying their bodies (Tiggemann and Golder 2006).

Reasons or barriers that students forwarded for not getting tattoos (or another tattoo) included that (i) it is permanent; (ii) it is expensive; (iii) it could lead to hepatitis; (iv) parents disapprove; (v) their significant others comment; (vi) they have regrets about the tattoo; (vii) it leads to embarrassment; (viii) they are labeled deviant; (ix) there are medical complications; (x) peer perceptions are unwelcome; (xi) religious and moral reasons; (xii) it is unattractive; (xiii) the pain; and (xiv) to avoid scarring (Armstrong and Kelly 2001; Armstrong and Pace Murphy 1997; Armstrong et al. 2007; Armstrong et al. 2002a; Armstrong et al. 2004b; Deschesnes et al. 2006; Firmin et al. 2012; Fisher 2002; Koch et al. 2005; Millner and Eichold 2001; Quaranta et al. 2011; Wilson 2008). Psychosocial risks involved in getting tattoos include disappointment, embarrassment, low self-esteem, and unhappiness (Armstrong et al. 2007).

Perceptions and Stigma Related to Tattoos Armstrong et al. (2002a) believe that the more people are seen with tattoos, the more people will become comfortable with and less judgmental towards tattoos. Still, tattoos continue to symbolize the outsider status (Silver et al. 2011), are related to something that is deviant (Deschesnes et al. 2006; Firmin et al. 2008; Fisher 2002; Kosut 2000; Stein 2011), and the public tends to attach negative attributes to individuals who have tattoos (Silver et al. 2011). Thus, people still view people with tattoos as deviant; having no self-worth; lacking good judgment; being less religious; having low self-esteem; being sexually promiscuous; being dangerous and self-destructive; being drug addicts and heavy drinkers; being impulsive decision makers; being easily swayed by peer pressure; having had unhappy

childhoods; getting tattooed while intoxicated; having lower academic abilities; and being from a lower socioeconomic status (Armstrong and Pace Murphy 1997; Armstrong et al. 2007; Armstrong et al. 2004a; Brallier et al. 2011; Dickson et al. 2014; Firmin et al. 2008, 2012; Heywood et al. 2012; Kosut 2000; Lipscomb et al. 2008; Silver et al. 2011).

Previous generations (older people) and individuals from higher income groups and educational backgrounds are more inclined to hold negative attitudes towards tattoos and people with tattoos (Dickson et al. 2014; Firmin et al. 2012). Women are often more stigmatized for having tattoos than men are, as they are seen as violators of gender roles because men receive more social acceptance for tattoos than women do (Dickson et al. 2014; Hawkes et al. 2004; Swami and Furnham 2007). Furthermore, employers are still inclined to rather appoint non-tattooed individuals than tattooed individuals (Brallier et al. 2011). Students in a study by Dale et al. (2009) indicated that they viewed tattoos as out of place in the working environment and believed that a person should exhibit a professional image. The majority of the students also indicated that they believed that people with visible tattoos will be less likely to be employed.

While some studies found that female students were more inclined to have tattoos than male students were (Armstrong et al. 2002b; King and Vidourek 2007, 2013; Mun et al. 2012), other studies (Grulich et al. 2003; Heywood et al. 2012; Makkai and McAllister 2001) indicate that men are still more comfortable than women to get tattoos. In general, women are more inclined to conceal their tattoos than men are (Dickson et al. 2014; Mun et al. 2012) and are usually perceived more negatively than men when they have tattoos (Brallier et al. 2011). Women with tattoos are viewed as less physically attractive, motivated, kind, athletic, stylish, religious, and intellectual, but more creative and sexually promiscuous than women without tattoos (Degelman and Price 2002; Guéguen 2013; Resenhoeft et al. 2008; Swami and Furnham 2007). King and Vidourek (2013) found that people were more accepting of women getting tattoos when the tattoos were regarded as an extension of body adornment techniques.

Persons who experience social stigma regarding their tattoos tend to conceal their tattoos for fear of social rejection (Fisher 2002). Many individuals reported that they were embarrassed about having tattoos and made use of clothing and jewelry to hide their tattoos (Armstrong et al. 2002a).

However, students do not tend to view themselves and others with tattoos as deviant (Koch et al. 2010). In studies by Firmin et al. (2012) and Greif et al. (1999), none of the students with tattoos interviewed expressed any regrets about getting their tattoos or the desire to have the tattoos removed. Some researchers (Millner and Eichold 2001) also found that some individuals were so satisfied with their tattoos that they were even planning to obtain more tattoos.

Rationale and Aim of the Research

Roux (2015) mentions that, although there is an increase in academic research regarding tattoos, there exists a lack of research in the South African context, especially with regard to tattoos as popular culture (as opposed to, for example, gang related behaviour and prison tattoos). Also Lombard and Bergh (2014) remarked on the growing popularity of tattoos, specifically among students in South Africa, with a lack of research in the field. This study is thus addressing a gap in research, by focussing specifically on tattoos as popular and non-deviant cultural practice in South African students. Due to limited research on tattoos amongst student populations in the South African context, this research study intent to identify and understand the deeper meaning of tattoos for a South African student population. Students normally are in the developmental stage of emerging adulthood where they experience more freedom to find themselves and form their own identities (Arnett 2007; Weiten 2014). Tattoos and the meaning of tattoos have been found to contribute to this identity development of individuals (Garcia-Merritt 2014; Sanders and Vail 2008). Arnett (2007) has emphasized the need for more research regarding the emerging adulthood developmental stage, and especially the identity development that ensue during this stage, both in the United States and in cultures around the world, such as South Africa.

The aim of this research study was thus to gain insight into a group of students' perceptions regarding tattoos. In particular, the following research questions were investigated:

1. How prevalent is the practice of getting a tattoo among a group of senior psychology students?
2. Are there significant differences between various gender, racial, and religious groupings with regard to getting a tattoo?
3. What are the most prominent reasons for getting or not getting a tattoo?
4. What perceptions do students hold regarding tattoos?

Method

A multi-methods research design (Mertens 2010; Silverman 2013) including quantitative and qualitative components was employed in this explorative and descriptive study.

Participants and Procedure Third-year students (senior students) registered for a research methodology module in Psychology were invited to participate in a class research project concerning tattoos. All students registered for this module, irrespective of their gender, ethnic, socio-economic, or educational backgrounds were welcome to participate.

Participants were recruited during class times, as well as on the online learning platform of the module. The purpose and nature of the study were explained to students, and they were invited to participate.

For the first phase of the research study, students completed a short survey that took approximately fifteen minutes to complete. In the beginning, participants were requested to provide certain biographic detail, such as information regarding their age, gender, race and religious affiliation. Although it is recognized that these variable are much more complex than just binary categories, for the sake of analyses, the following categories were recognized: gender (male or female); race (white or black, as these are the two racial groups representing the majority of students); and religious affiliation (where participants had the option to indicate whether they belong to any religious group and participate in any religious activities or not). The survey consisted of various questions of a quantitative nature (e.g., *How many tattoos do you have?*; *How many of your friends have tattoos?*), as well as questions of a qualitative nature (e.g., *What is your primary reason for getting – or not getting – a tattoo?*; *What is your opinion of people with tattoos?*). The survey was placed on the online learning platform of the module. Students who had trouble accessing the site were given the opportunity to complete the survey in paper format. In total, 175 students participated, representing a response rate of 35.28%. The biographic characteristics of the sample of participants who completed the survey (in relation to the population of all third-year psychology students at the institution) are summarized in Table 1.

For the second phase, students were invited to participate in multiple follow-up interviews (Patton 2002) with the aim of gaining more in-depth information about students' perceptions regarding tattoos. The semi-structured interview schedule for these multiple interviews corresponded with the questions posed in the survey, but allowed for more discussion of perceptions, as well as follow-up questions. The details of the five students who participated in these interviews are provided in Table 2.

Data Analysis Quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (Allen et al. 2014; Field 2009). Basic descriptive statistics and frequency distributions were documented, followed by chi-square tests for independence (two-by-two design) to determine the differences in various gender, racial, and religious affiliation groups with regard to having or not having a tattoo.

Qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis (Silverman 2011) and thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Using participants' qualitative responses on the online questionnaire, the content was analyzed to determine the frequency with which participants reported certain 1) reasons for getting or not getting tattoos; and 2) perceptions about tattoos (self and others). Following this, the interview transcriptions

Table 1 Biographic characteristics of the third-year population of students and the sample participating in this study

		All students (n = 496)		Participants (n = 175)	
		N	%	n	%
Gender	Male	110	22.18	24	13.7
	Female	386	77.82	148	84.6
	Unknown			3	1.7
Race	Black	308	62.1	92	52.6
	Colored (mixed race)	33	6.65	7	4
	White	150	30.24	69	39.4
	Other/Unknown	5	1	7	4
Age	18			1	0.6
	19			1	0.6
	20			127	72.6
	20+			45	25.7
Religious affiliation	Yes			148	84.6
	No			14	8.0
	Preferred not to answer			15	7.5

were analyzed thematically. In analyses of the content and themes, a hybrid approach of data-driven inductive coding and theory-driven deductive coding, as suggested by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006), was followed. Before coding started, a codebook with a priori codes (including code labels and descriptions) was compiled based on the initial scanning of the data. Coding was guided but not limited to these codes, and space was allowed for adding codes that might emerge from the data as the process evolved. All the meaningful segments of data were coded independently. Two sets of ratings were completed by two independent raters and then compared for consistency by a third rater. After inter-rater reliability was ensured, codes were organized into further clusters and themes, to present patterns in the data most meaningfully.

Ethical Considerations At the beginning of the study, ethical clearance was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of the Humanities (UFS-HUM-2014-59) at the University of the Free State, South Africa. During the

Table 2 Biographic characteristics of the participants in interviews

Participant	Gender	Age	Race	Tattoo
1	Female	20+	White	Yes
2	Female	20+	Black	Yes
3	Female	20+	Black	No
4	Female	20+	Black	No
5	Male	20+	Black	No

implementation of the study, various guidelines for ethical research practices (Allan 2011; Health Professions Council of South Africa 2008) were adhered to. Emphasis was placed on accurate and complete information for the participants to understand the importance and purpose of the study and make informed decisions regarding their participation. All participants were ensured that their participation was completely voluntary. The researchers avoided biased, judgmental, unskilled, unethical, or dishonest application of the information. All the participants were informed of their right to privacy and the right to decide to what extent their attitudes, beliefs, and behavior should be revealed. Survey responses were completely anonymous; therefore, there was no risk that students would fall victim to any discriminatory practices for not completing the survey, or for providing personal opinions. During the multiple interviews, ground rules for a respectful discussion were set at the beginning of the sessions. A possible risk of participating in this study was that participants might become aware of personal or emotional aspects connected to them for having a tattoo (e.g., they might reflect on facing judgment or prejudice from others for having a tattoo). The researchers were prepared to refer participants to Student Counseling and Development Services if the need arose.

Results

The prevalence of tattoos among participants, their parents, and friends are presented in Table 3.

Considering Table 3, the following tendencies are observed: The majority of the participants (78.3%) did not have tattoos. Most participants' parents (92%) did not have tattoos, but most of their friends (74.3%) had tattoos. Nearly half of the participants (46.9%) were considering getting a tattoo or another tattoo.

Differences with Regard to Gender, Race, and Religious Grouping The chi-square test was applied to determine whether there were significant differences between tattoo frequencies (having a tattoo or not) and 1) gender (male or female); 2) religious affiliation (yes or no); and 3) race (e. g. white or black). No statistically significant associations were found for gender $\chi^2(1, N = 172) = 0.026, p = 0.873$, or religious affiliation $\chi^2(1, N = 162) = 0.357, p = 0.550$. The chi-square test was statistically significant for race $\chi^2(1, N = 161) = 4.535, p = 0.033$. The actual association between race and getting a tattoo was small ($\Phi = 0.168$), indicating that race explains only 2.8% of the variance, with participants from the black racial group being marginally less likely to have a tattoo.

Table 3 Summary of the frequency of tattoo practices

		n	%
How many tattoos	0	137	78.3
	1	16	9.1
	2	13	7.4
	More than 2	9	5.1
Intention to get a(nother) tattoo	Yes	82	46.9
	No	90	51.4
	Not answered	3	1.7
Parents with tattoos	No tattoo	161	92.0
	1 tattoo	11	6.3
	2 tattoos	1	0.6
	2+ tattoos	2	1.1
Friends with tattoos	No tattoo	45	25.7
	1 tattoo	40	22.9
	2 tattoos	26	14.9
	2 + tattoos	64	36.6

Reasons for Getting (or Not Getting) a Tattoo Participants reported a wide range of reasons for getting (or not getting) a tattoo. In Table 4, a frequency distribution of the reasons for getting (or not getting) a tattoo is provided, ranked by importance (from highest to lowest in frequency).

The participants were divided relatively equally between positive (46.9%) and negative (50.3%) responses (5 participants did not answer this question). The reasons for getting (or not getting) a tattoo can be grouped into the following themes: Positive responses related mostly to personal and internally motivated reasons such as the symbolic and expressive nature of tattoos (e. g. personal meaning, significant memory, extension of personality, expression of self) and finding tattoos appealing (e. g. forms of art). Negative responses were mostly grouped along social and cultural motivators (religion, disapproval from family and friends, negative influence at work); physical and medical in nature (medical reasons, fear of needles or pain, respect for body) and finding tattoos unappealing.

Reasons for getting a tattoo: The most prominent motivation for getting a tattoo (25.1%) related to its symbolic personal meaning (such as to remember an important event or struggle in their lives). Reasons participants provided included “to keep my mother’s memory”; “a way of honoring my first child”; and “presented what I was going through at a certain time of my life”. Many participants (12%) also regarded their tattoos as an extension of their personality or expression of a sense of self. Comments included “My body is a book, my tattoos is [sic] my story.” and “Tattoos is [sic] an extension of your personality, everyone is given a blank canvas to paint on – if you wish.”

Table 4 Frequency distribution of the reasons for getting (or not getting) a tattoo

	n	%
Symbolic personal meaning / Significant memory	44	25.1
Extension of personality / Expression of self	21	12.0
Religious reasons	20	11.4
Permanence / Looks unappealing in old age	18	10.3
Medical reasons, fear of needles or pain	17	9.7
Find tattoos unappealing	14	8.0
Do not care	9	5.1
Approval / disapproval from family and friends	9	5.1
Form of art	6	3.4
Unprofessional / negative influence at work	5	2.9
Respect for body	5	2.9
No answer	5	2.9
Other	2	1.1
Total	175	100.0

Reasons for not getting a tattoo: Participants who did not have tattoos, mostly provided reasons that were religious in nature (11.4%), including the following: “*I am a religious person so my body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. I'd like to keep clean.*”; “*Because it is biblically wrong & I am noted in bible principles.*”; and “*I am a Christian, it is conflicting as in the Christian religion to treat and respect one's body as a temple.*” Some of the participants (10.3%) also expressed concerns regarding the permanency of tattoos and that it looks unattractive on old people. Medical reasons or fear of needles and pain (9.7%) were also mentioned. Some participants regarded tattoos as unattractive. A participant mentioned: “*I wouldn't get one. Would you put a bumper sticker on a Ferrari?*”

Perceptions Regarding Own and Others' Tattoos The participants' perceptions about tattoos and people with tattoos were mostly non-judgmental. In answering the question “*What is your opinion about tattoos and people with tattoos?*”, the majority of participants (54.3%) reported positive opinions; 18.3% had mixed feelings; 12.6% were negative; and 14.9% either had no opinion or did not care at all. Most participants appreciated that people have the right to do with their bodies what they want. For example, a participant stated, “*They're cool and all, just not for me.*”

When responding to the question “*What do you think are people's opinions of tattoos?*”, the majority of participants (38.9%) were of the opinion that people have mixed feelings or negative perceptions (35.4%), while 17.1% felt that people were positive about tattoo practices and 4% did not express an opinion. The few extreme viewpoints that were raised

regarding people with tattoos, ranged from very positive to very negative.

Positive perceptions: Positive viewpoints included regarding tattoos as attractive and regarding people with tattoos as cool (and hot), trendy, fashionable, interesting, spontaneous, creative, artistic, free-spirited, more open/accepting, liberal, adventurous, brave, strong, courageous, and not afraid of commitment and pain. One participant mentioned, “*[People with tattoos are the] realest people [you] ever will meet*”.

Negative perceptions: Negative comments included regarding tattoos as ugly, trashy, messy, common, cheap, filthy, and impractical, and people with tattoos as evil, satanic, dangerous, rebellious, ungodly, stupid, reckless, unprofessional, and weird, not-Christian, criminally inclined, cruel, evil, “showoffs”, outcasts, anti-social, lacking morals, and defying society. A participant shared the following opinion: “*They just got a tattoo because they were rebelling or they are bad ass.*” Some regarded having tattoos as a sign of looking for attention, being disrespectful towards others, people not appreciating themselves, having psychological problems and not respecting themselves. For example, a participant said, “*They want to feel a sense of belonging, attention and want to be feared*”, while another said, “*They like [want] to appear unique, cool and be fashionable.*” Having tattoos was associated with gangs and criminals, certain tribes, drug users, and alcoholics.

Conditional perceptions: In raising their personal opinions, many participants mentioned conditions for acceptability (to justify getting a tattoo). Most participants were comfortable with tattoos, provided that the tattoo has meaning for the individual or is a form of expression. Participants were more critical in certain instances related to specifically age and work professionalism. A participant said, “*For young people it is stylish and cool, but when they grow old and they have tattoos it looks disgusting and inappropriate as if they are getting old but do not want to accept by still liking things. In the workplace tattoos are not appropriate and the person may seem unprofessional, or not serious about his/her career.*” In addition to this, participants had strong opinions regarding the number, size and placement of tattoos, as can be seen from the following quotations:

“*I find some tattoos to be very scary, in terms of images and size of tattoos.*”

“*I must admit, I tend to be skeptical of someone who has an arm/leg/back full of tattoos (usually patterns) – in my opinion, there is something as too many tattoos. However, if someone had tattoos which meant*

something to them (e.g., a name of a person who has passed on / a logo symbolizing an important event in their lives) that's perfectly fine - something I might consider getting myself in the future."

"I approve of tattoos that have meaning to the person and something small. It does not look good if your whole body is covered with tattoos. And it does not look professional when your tattoos can be seen or cover your body."

"It depends where the tattoo is and how many does a person have ... those colorful tattoos all over a person's arm freak me out."

"If people overdo it with tattoos, for example sleeves, their whole body or a random big picture covering 70% of their body, that's just ugly. Why go ruin your whole body that's going to fade away in a few years and look even more ugly than it already is. Just do something simple."

Consequences: Most of the participants with tattoos had not experienced any negative consequences because of having tattoos, and did not regret getting one. The worst regrets were regarding getting a tattoo from an incompetent tattoo artist or getting a tattoo that is too large and/or unattractive. Other regrets related to pain, realizing permanency, some judgment, or getting the wrong tattoos (e.g., of an ex-girlfriend's name). A few participants mentioned that getting a tattoo was an impulsive decision.

Most participants with tattoos regarded the prejudice some people portray towards them as unimportant. A participant stated, *"So I feel like I would be like 'ah so you don't like it ... so what?' I have to wake up in this body in the morning, not you."* Another participant said, *"They should get over their prejudices. There are plenty of highly educated and intelligent people with tattoos."*

Discussion

In this study, among this sample of senior psychology students, it was found that having a tattoo was still not a prominent practice. The 78.3% of students without tattoos is a much higher percentage that would have been expected, considering the fact that many researchers report a growing prevalence of tattoos, especially among young people (Armstrong and Kelly 2001; Armstrong and Pace Murphy 1997; Armstrong et al. 2002b; Firmin et al. 2012). Still, more students (21.7%) reported having tattoos, while 8% of their parents had tattoos – indicating a growth in tattoo practices from the previous generation to the next. Similar to results in

previous studies (Armstrong et al. 2002a, 2002b), students in this study were mostly non-judgmental about having tattoos, and approximately half of them were open to the thought of obtaining a tattoo or another one. A noteworthy number of participants indicated that they would consider getting a tattoo – especially if and when it is personally meaningful. This concurs with results reported by other researchers that alluded to the opinion that tattoos are legitimized when one has deep spiritual and semantic reasons for having tattoos (Dickson et al. 2014). In this study, no significant differences were found in the tattoo practices among gender and religious groups, but black students were less inclined to have tattoos. These results will be explicated in the following paragraphs.

With regard to gender, previous studies report conflicting results. While some report females to have more tattoos (Armstrong et al. 2002b; Hill et al. 2016; King and Vidourek 2007, 2013; Mun et al. 2012; Rivardo and Keelan 2010), other studies indicate that men are still more comfortable than women to get tattoos (Grulich et al. 2003; Heywood et al. 2012; Makkai and McAllister 2001), while others found no significant gender differences in tattoo behaviour (Dickson et al. 2014). The fact that no significant gender differences were found in this study, might be explained by the fact that only the amount of tattoos and not the size and placement of tattoos were measured. According to Dickson et al. (2014) and Mun et al. (2012), women are more inclined to conceal their tattoos than men are. In a study among South African students, Roux (2015) found that, while females have tattoos, they are usually smaller and more easily concealed. Differences in tattoo practices is thus not only seen in the amount of tattoos (as measured in this study), but also in size and placement.

While some studies report a negative correlation between religious affiliation / belief and prevalence of tattoos (Laumann and Derick 2006; Wilson 2008), especially in the case of "intense religious faith" (Armstrong et al. 2002b), others report minor or no relationships (Firmin et al. 2008; Rivardo and Keelan 2010). According to Firmin et al. (2008), this can be explained by the fact that religious individuals might not regard tattoos as deviant, but see tattoos as symbols of their faith. Koch et al. (2004) argue that the absence of a strong relationship between religious faith and tattoo behavior might be explained by the fact that tattoos are not as stigmatized as in the past and that other variables might play a greater role. In South Africa, both Bergh (2016) and Roux (2015) found religion to be the reason for getting a tattoo amongst many students. In this study, there were religiously affiliated students who had tattoos, and a few students regarded their tattoos as symbols of faith, but most participants indicated that religion deterred them from getting tattoos. These contradictory reasons (religion as motivator vs religion as deterrent) might have resulted in the insignificant differences in religious groupings in this study.

With regards to race and ethnicity, most studies report no relationships between tattoo prevalence and ethnicity (Foster and Hummel 2000; Laumann and Derick 2006). In contrast to this, the current study yielded significant results regarding race, with fewer black students having tattoos. A possible explanation for this, can be an argument posed by Roux (2015). In her study, Roux (2015) alludes to the importance of tattoos as cultural practices. Considering South Africa's history of segregation, it is possible that the two racial groupings studied in the current study differ much in terms of the norms and values they were exposed to in the past. More practical reasons such as accessibility and financial cost (which would be a greater consideration for black students) might also be a reason. Since no evidence for these possibilities can be provided, these results warrant further research.

Of the wide range of reasons for getting a tattoo, the most prominent motivations for getting a tattoo among participants in this study related to its symbolic personal meaning and memory (25.1%) and its self-expression value as an extension of one's personality (12%). This finding corresponds with various previous research statements that body art enables students to project who they are (Armstrong et al. 2002a; Armstrong et al. 2004b; Greif et al. 1999; King and Vidourek 2013; Lipscomb et al. 2008; Roberti and Storch 2005). Tattoos tell a story about the person's journey. Tattoos are added as a personal story unfolds - a new stage is entered, or victory over a crisis prevails and not generally for the sake of competition or as prescribed by culture.

Reasons for not having or getting a tattoo were mostly religious in nature (11.4%). While previous research associated religion both positively (for example, a tattoo could symbolize a certain religious commitment) and negatively with tattoo practices, the participants in this study almost exclusively devalued tattoos when considering religion. This concurs with the findings of Armstrong et al. (2002b) and Armstrong et al. (2004a) and, as the aforementioned researchers also argued, might be attributed to the students in this sample being from religious and rural communities that are more conservative.

Maybe more so than in previous research in this field, this sample expressed concerns regarding the permanency of tattoos. The particular concern of this sample with (and negative regard of) the permanence of tattoos may be a result of the third-year psychology students' awareness of life-span development and the potential physical-psychological effects of such an acquisition.

The participants in this study were not judgmental about tattoo practices and mostly sanctioned the use of tattoos, especially if these tattoos were regarded as personally meaningful, small, not overly colorful, and preferably concealed. Some of them seemed to have taken a professional stance and conscious decision in being non-judgmental of others having tattoos (as they might feel is expected in the psychology profession).

Concluding Remarks

Although the acquisition of tattoos seems to be on an increase amongst student populations, the most participants in this study (78.3%) did not have tattoos and they were relatively non-judgmental with regard to tattoo practices. This finding might be unique in the sense that the population of interest were students majoring in Psychology, which is a profession where prospective therapists are taught to not judge others and their morals, values and opinions. In preparing for a field associated with journal writing and life stories, the participants came forth as contemplative and observant. Tattoos were valued for their symbolic personal meaning and as a form of self-expression, while religion, the permanence of tattoos and medical aspects deterred students from getting a tattoo.

This study contributes to the understanding of the role tattoos play in expressing the identities of individuals and communities, here specifically then concerning third-year psychology students and their perceptions regarding tattoos and people with tattoos. Due to the lack of research among South African student populations, this study adds valuable arguments to the knowledge base on tattoos as popular culture in the South African society. The results of this study should be interpreted in light of the fact that the majority of participants were black, religious, female psychology students. The results also point to the importance of further studies - to confirm and explain some of the findings. For example, the fact that race did seem to relate to tattoo practices (in contrast to many studies conducted in other countries) might point to cultural nuances between racial / ethnic groups that warrant further investigation.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in this study (involving human participants) were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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